

Rare Chatty Songbird Spotted in Calif.

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FRESNO, Calif. (AP) -- A chatty songbird thought to have disappeared from the Central Valley 60 years ago has been spotted nesting in a patch of restored habitat along the San Joaquin River.

The least Bell's vireo, a little gray songbird that fits in a closed fist, was once widespread in the Central Valley. It disappeared from the area as the riparian habitat it favors was ripped up to make way for development and agriculture. About 90 percent of the valley's historic riverside vegetation has been lost, said Al Donner, spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The bird was put on the federal endangered species list in 1986, when there were only about 300 pairs left in the low-lying shrubbery along creeks and streams in southern California.

Linette Lina, a seasonal biologist at the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge west of Modesto, first recognized the vireo by its distinctive song on Friday.

"It's unlike any other song out there," she said. "They're little birds, but they sing loudly, and a lot."

Dropping her equipment, Lina focused her binoculars on the bird -- a male perched on a branch about 30 feet away, singing and shaking his tail feathers. As she called her supervisor about the discovery, a female joined him and did a copulation dance.

Further investigation showed the nesting pair was feeding two baby birds, which were just learning to fly, said Lina, who does bird counts and observation for the Point Reyes Bird Observatory Conservation Science.

Other bird monitors were called to verify, and they were able to record the birds and confirm the species on Tuesday.

The area where they were found had been a ranch, which was bought in 1998 and restored over the last three years by Fish and Wildlife with help from the state of California.